

Naval Aviation Enterprise looks to ready troops at the right cost

By CLAIRE TRAGESER

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A small naval organization based in San Diego has worked to change the Navy's culture from one of consumption to one of conservation, according to current and former leaders.

Structured like a trade organization or a board of directors, the Naval Aviation Enterprise brings together leaders from across Navy and Marine aviation to collaborate on how to improve their forces' readiness and better spend taxpayer money.

While the organization does not make final decisions or give orders that must be followed, it informs and helps the people who make decisions, said Jim Beebe, a retired rear admiral and current Naval Aviation Enterprise executive director.

"It provides a very collaborative alignment of stakeholders," he said. "We're really in the business of providing the right amount of readiness at the right cost at the right time."

The enterprise was set up in 2004 after the success of the Naval Aviation Pilot Production Improvement Program, the Aviation Maintenance and Supply Readiness group, and the Naval Aviation Readiness Integrated Improvement Program, which aimed to increase efficiency and reduce costs of providing crews and aircraft that were ready for battle.

Today the Naval Aviation Enterprise consists of 34 leadership positions: a 10-person executive committee and a 24-person "extended air board." All of these leaders have primary responsibilities outside of the enterprise but hold a stake in naval aviation, which means they bring their outside expertise and influence into the enterprise.

Beyond this core leadership, about 192,000 people are directly or indirectly involved with the enterprise, Beebe said.

"Anybody that has the ability to influence the business of naval aviation is part of the collaborative structure we call Naval Aviation Enterprise," he said.

Although some of the organization's leaders have offices inside Naval Air Station North Island on Coronado, Naval Aviation Enterprise does not have its own location, said its deputy director, Jake Warriner.

"What gets people confused is it doesn't have a street address," he said.

The result, Warriner said, is that instead of having a group of people making executive decisions about naval aviation, the enterprise brings together stakeholders who each have their own input.

For example, the enterprise has worked to reduce the cost of each naval flight hour, which involved looking into everything from how many training hours each pilot flies to what kind of landing gear to buy.

"Everyone in the room will have a different component of that cost per hour and can work together as a partnership," Warriner said.

That effort paid off, Beebe said. Between 2004 and 2009, the enterprise helped the Navy spend \$4 billion less than it would have without the collaboration, while working with an operating cost of a few million a year, he said.

"That \$4 billion involved hundreds if not thousands of decisions made over that five-year period," Warriner said. "We got a terrific return on our investment."

Savings like that will become even more important as the military moves toward a time of reduced budgets and spending, Beebe said.

"What we do is exactly the approach that has to be taken to operate in a fiscally challenging environment," he said. "The rest of the Navy has also embraced the enterprise approach, but when you look across the rest of the Navy, I can safely say we are the most mature of the other enterprise efforts."

The enterprise has also assisted in decisions on the realignment and consolidation of Fleet Readiness Centers, which are akin to naval shipyards, and the transitions from older models of aircraft to newer replacements.

All of these changes mark a major cultural shift in naval aviation, said Rear Adm. Pat McGrath, the deputy commander of Naval Air Forces and a former member of the enterprise's executive committee.

"Thirty years ago when I was flying, naval aviation was a consumer organization," McGrath said.

For example, he said, the number of allotted flight hours used to be based on the previous year.

"But what started happening over the years is we started saying, 'Let's not talk about flight time based on last year, let's talk about time based on what you actually need,'" he said.

By removing the emphasis on increased flight hours and instead focusing it on using planes efficiently, the enterprise helped the Navy preserve its planes for longer, which saves money, McGrath said.

"It changed the culture in a lot of ways from one of consumption to one of conservation," he said. "We still have to utilize our aircraft, which involves putting them in stressful circumstances, but no one wants to burn them out faster than we have to."

While the Naval Aviation Enterprise has not "turned the Navy into a business," McGrath said, it has ushered in an era of "looking at the business of naval aviation so we're really good stewards of taxpayers' dollars."

This message was echoed by Warriner, who said it is one of the Naval Aviation Enterprise's core guiding principles.

"We want to be terrific stewards of taxpayer dollars, that's an awareness we have and an obligation we believe in," he said. "It sounds trite to say it, but we're all taxpayers. We have an obligation not only to protect the country, but also to understand the fiscal pressures on it."

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